

In the Spring 2025 Warnock lecture given by Dr. Anne Lafont- titled “The Paper Fetish, or Art History Without Objects”, Dr. Lafont makes a strong case about how the European framework absorbed African religious objects, especially the ones they categorized as “fetishes”, through orientalized texts and illustrations rather than through actual physical and material incorporation. Dr. Lafont presents a thesis that states that what she calls paper fetishes- the texts and illustrations by Europeans through which these objects were absorbed into the western frameworks- are a core part of how art history was framed before even the collection of these religious objects and their addition to European collections, during the colonial age. This, in turn, led to the way that African religious cultures were perceived and aestheticized. In other words. Dr. Lafont proposes that these objects were remodeled or reframed to fit the European / Western framework.

Dr. Lafont’s argument is particularly interesting in the way it presents the duality of the incorporation of African religious objects, as fetishes, and their dismissal- as objects that represented primitive and rudimentary belief systems and cultures. Although these religious objects were seen as lacking in refinement they were still absorbed into the European intellectual sphere. Dr. Lafont backs up her thesis by referencing things like the Marquis de Robien’s collection and his written inventory of it. Robien describes these African religious objects with a sense of fascination and wonder, however, he also describes them in an almost dismissive and disdainful manner. Robien displays them alongside great classical European works; nevertheless, he describes them as theologically misguided and unskilled in their craftsmanship. This duality is evidence of the slow, reluctant, and in a sense orientalized absorption of these objects into the European and Western framework.

Dr. Lafont’s lecture opens the door for reflection on the colonial implications of the foundations of art history as we know it. The theory she presents on the “paper fetish” parallels the likes of Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism. The way that these African religious objects were incorporated into the European knowledge base and philosophical sphere mirrors what the

theory of Orientalism says about how European and Western societies draw misguided mental pictures and improper knowledge about Non-European cultures through the control of the representation of those societies in literature and other forms of art. African religious objects when they were finally introduced to European collections and museums were introduced to an audience with preconceived notions and biases about the cultures from which these objects originated. [As someone who grew up living between Saudi Arabia and the States, I unfortunately find this framework and way of thinking too familiar. I've witnessed first hand how the cultures of the global south are often reduced to certain images that are rooted in the colonial framework. Dr. Lafont's lecture emphasizes and proves that these images weren't the result of simple innocent misunderstandings, but part of a long history of colonialism and imperialism.]

In conclusion, Dr. Lafont's Spring 2025 Warnock lecture reminds us all that the formation of the discipline of art history has always been intertwined with colonialism, orientalism, and imperialism. The concept of the "paper fetish" that she presents shows us how Non-European cultures were presented through these distorted lenses often before representative elements of these cultures were available for public consumption or viewing. Dr. Lafont makes us think not only about what is displayed in our museums, but also the history behind how we view said pieces, the preconceived biases we have, and how said biases formed.